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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate the need for distance career counseling services, and to present an evolving counseling model that combines the best practices of face-to-face career counseling with technology. The article begins by tracing the historical development of distance career counseling models, and then illustrates several rationales for applications of technology to career counseling models. Ensuing discussion includes an examination of the following topics: client expectations and education regarding both face-to-face and distance career counseling services; the integration of technology with career counseling; counselor recruitment, training, and supervision; ethical issues and credentialing; assessments, web resources and written communication; appraisal of client satisfaction and program effectiveness; identification and handling of difficult situations; and the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships among career services, business, and technology professionals. (Contains 37 references.) (Author)

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Distance Career Counseling: A Technology-Assisted Model for Delivering Career Counseling Services

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Chapter Two

Distance Career Counseling: A Technology-Assisted Model for Delivering Career Counseling Services

by Yas Djadali & James F. Malone

Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate the need for distance career counseling services, and to present an evolving counseling model that combines the best practices of face-to-face career counseling with technology. The article begins by tracing the historical development of distance career counseling models, and then illustrates several rationales for applications of technology to career counseling models. Ensuing discussion includes an examination of the following topics: 1) client expectations and education regarding both face-to-face and distance career counseling services, 2) the integration of technology with career counseling, 3) counselor recruitment, training, and supervision, 4) ethical issues and credentialing, 5) assessments, web resources and written communication, 6) appraisal of client satisfaction and program effectiveness, 7) identification and handling of difficult situations, and 8) the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships among career services, business, and technology professionals.

Distance Career Counseling: A Technology-Assisted Model For Delivering Career Counseling Services

In a constantly evolving society, career counseling professionals must continuously re-evaluate techniques and delivery systems in order to provide meaningful and effective services to the various populations they serve. By the year 2006, there are predicted to be over 900 million Internet users worldwide (Attridge, n.d.). Technological advances have provided opportunities for greater outreach and more efficient and expansive services in all realms of society. Distance learning is a prime example of how information technology continues to be used to access previously underserved populations (Sampson & Bloom, 2001). According to survey data from the Gallup Organization, almost 25% of college students report using the Internet as an information source for career planning, a number that is likely to increase rapidly as more students of the "Internet generation" progress through the educational system (Malone, Miller, & Hargraves, 2001). Even at middle and high school levels, counselors are using the Internet more and more to assist students in accessing career-related information (Refvem, 2000). However, the use of computer-related technology is not an entirely new event within the field of career counseling.

Technology-Assisted Distance Career Counseling Interventions: History, Rationales, and Delivery Models

History of Distance Career Counseling Practices

As with most technological advances in our society, the development of a technology-assisted distance career counseling model did not happen overnight. Over the last 30 years, counselors and clients have enjoyed the benefits of computer-assisted guidance and assessment models, as well as sophisticated computer information dissemination systems. Bloom and Walz (2000), among others, have recounted the historical relationship between counseling services and computer technologies. The trend toward increased Internet use and reliance on technology to assist the counseling process will continue to progress steadily for several reasons which include: 1) greater cost-effectiveness, 2) a general increase in use of Internet applications both inside and outside the home, and 3) continued pressure for distance learning services (Sampson, 2000).

We are presently in another stage of development of this continuously emerging practice delivery model. Current trends in counseling literature as a whole continue to address position and point-of-view articles expressing

concerns about distance career-related interventions (lack of technological access for some, invalid online assessments and information, overload of Internet resources, confidentiality, and many other challenging issues). However, we are also seeing increased examples of actual practice models and techniques that go beyond the use of computers to assist with assessment, information retrieval, and job search strategies. These models are seeking to make use of technology to provide actual career counseling where the counselor and client work from the strength of the counseling relationship. Rosenfield (1997) has offered a comprehensive treatment of counseling by telephone. Harris-Bowlsbey, Riley Dikel and Sampson (2002) offer a comprehensive guide to counselors and clients who choose to use the Internet in career planning.

Boer (2001) reports from the field on many actual examples of online counseling that help newcomers understand both the limitations as well as the encouraging results emerging from career counseling over the Internet. Much of the research at this stage is qualitative and exploratory, but trends are appearing which hold out positive promise for eventual theory-based practices.

Rationales for Distance Career Counseling Services

Sampson and Bloom (2000) cite a number of compelling reasons that counselors and clients are choosing to engage in distance career counseling. Counselors who are trained in distance career counseling techniques may help clients enhance already existing face-to-face services by providing an extension of availability to their own clients, and they may also provide extended supplemental help to clients in a value-added partnership arrangement with other counseling individuals or entities. The distance model also allows counselors to extend counseling availability to individuals because of factors related to convenience, location, physical challenges, personal communication style preferences, and a desire to access state-of-the-art services which are not available to them through face-to-face options. Thus, populations who may have been underserved in the past (i.e., commuter students, transfer students, university/college alumni, persons with disabilities that inhibit mobility, and persons who live in remote areas) now have more access to comprehensive career counseling services.

In addition, recent demographic trends have recognized a growing number of returning adult students, whose needs may differ from those of traditionally-aged undergraduate students served by university career counseling programs (Luzzo, 2000). Distance career counselors can assist this population of returning students as well as other clients in need of personally meaningful access to enormous Internet resources for career information and exploration. The Internet also provides counselors access to resources and services delivered by a wider range of specialists, which allows counseling sessions to be better tailored to individual client needs (Sampson, 1999b).

Types of Distance Delivery Models

In selecting the most effective and useful technology-assisted models for delivering distance career counseling, the most promising options may include various combinations of telecounseling, synchronous and/or asynchronous chat or e-mail-supported counseling, video-assisted live counseling, and guided use of Internet resources to support the client and the work of the counseling (Sampson & Bloom, 2000). The present article focuses primarily on telecounseling, with e-mail-support and Internet resources.

Data already exist suggesting that clients would find telecounseling effective and convenient, despite the lack of non-verbal communication (Coman, Burrows, & Evans, 2001). Telecounseling not only provides clients with greater access to services, but also with relative anonymity, which may be perceived as a safer venue for self-disclosure. Research has also demonstrated the success of a number of different structured counseling programs via the telephone (Rosenfield, 1997).

Client Education and Expectations About Face-to-Face and Distance Career Counseling Interventions

Before engaging in any form of career counseling, clients must be informed about the benefits and realistic expectations of the process. In other words, they must understand the nature and effective outcomes and limitations of career counseling. The National Career Development Association (NCDA) website (http://www.ncda.org) presents helpful information under the title *Consumer Guidelines to Selecting a Career Counselor.*

Integrating distance career counseling models and practices may further influence a client's outcomes and expectations. Their understanding needs to be "fine-tuned" further with respect to the specific terms, conditions,

risks, strategies, advantages, disadvantages, and logistical communication realities and ethical issues inherent in distance career counseling. Clients engaged in both face-to-face and distance counseling services need to recognize their own responsibility in the process. Even in a distance model, clients are expected to be available for scheduled career counseling sessions and fully engaged in the career counseling process. This commitment to the counseling relationship also includes responding promptly and appropriately to e-mails, a primary form of communication in-between telephone sessions.

Just as in face-to-face counseling, it is necessary that clients sign an informed consent agreement when receiving distance counseling, recognizing the risks and responsibilities within a distance counselor-client relationship (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). Clients may also reference the NCDA website for *NCDA Guidelines for The Use of The Internet for The Provision of Career Information and Planning Services.*

Reactive, Distance Career Guidance Services Versus Proactive, Systematically Delivered Distance Career Counseling Programs

The primary difference between reactive, distance career guidance services and proactive, systematically delivered distance career counseling programs is that the former are delivered "on demand," whereas the latter allow for a "planned and anticipated" course of counseling. Evidence from meta-analytic studies conducted by Brown and Krane (2000) supports the power of individualized career guidance components, such as counselor-assisted interpretation of assessment and written action plans, to provide effective outcomes for clients when these practices are delivered systematically within a supportive counseling relationship.

The Internet is playing an increasing role in how persons learn and behave, so it seems only natural that this tool be applied to career counseling programs, where clients can use it for career assessment, exploration, and other helpful activities. Walz (2000) states that it is our responsibility as counselors and educators to prepare our clients for "informed and skillful use of an increasingly important resource," one that he identifies as "the most ubiquitous of all learning resources" (p. 408).

Sampson, Kolodinsky, and Green (1997) conducted an analysis using the WebCrawler Internet search engine to search counseling home pages. Results revealed a growth rate of 15% over a 3-month period, with 3,764 sites found the first month and 4,584 found the third. Two hundred and seventy-five practitioners were also found offering direct-online services to clients, indicating that the integration of information technology with counseling is a present reality. Rather than ignoring the inevitable, it is our responsibility as career counseling professionals to ensure that it is used in a way that is most beneficial and effective for clients.

Implementing the counseling process within a proactive and systematically delivered distance model requires careful strategy and integration. For example, the ReadyMinds Distance Career Counseling Program (Ready and Motivated Minds, L.L.C.) integrates the use of technology within four stages of the career planning process: Self-Assessment, Exploration, Decision-Making, and Self-Marketing. Self-Assessment is conducted though an online intake form and the Internet Version of the Self-Directed Search (Psychological Assessment Resources). Through individual telephone counseling appointments, the career counselor is able to help clients further clarify their interests, values, and skills, and begin goal-identification and action plan strategies. Exploration, Decision-Making, and Self-Marketing are also addressed during the telephone counseling appointments, depending on client need, and are supplemented with Internet referral sources. Thus, career counseling, which has been traditionally conducted via face-to-face contact, can be conducted at a distance, using technology as a vehicle.

Counselor Recruitment, Training and Supervision

Recruitment of Distance Career Counselors

Considering the counselor's key role and the special challenges of working in a distance delivery environment in the process, special attention must be paid to counselor recruitment, education, training, and supervision. The use of Internet and e-mail provides opportunities to recruit a diverse pool of career counselors, who have the convenience of working from home-offices during preferred hours (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). Implementing an effective distance career counseling program requires that these counselors have had training in telephone career counseling skills, technology capability and equipment, and oral/written communication strategies. Counselors at various stages of their own careers and professional experience will most likely need a

variety of training protocols as they engage in distance work with clients.

Training of Distance Career Counselors

In general, the training challenges of a distance model include adjusting already acquired and trusted counseling skills to a new communication environment, and integrating technology/Internet-supported techniques into the process. However, in order to be successful in this new delivery model of career counseling, counselors must be open to the required new learning opportunities being offered by experienced distance career counselors (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). These protocols include applying technology to career counseling skills and tele/videocounseling practices, and adjusting counseling interview techniques accordingly. For example, when communicating with clients via e-mail, counselors may adopt a more conversational and less formal writing style, using emoticons to establish a more personal connection. Rosenfield (1997) reports several helpful adaptations to counselor verbal behavior when working with clients via telephone.

To serve clients more effectively, counselors must be competent using Internet search engines. They also need to be familiar with and able to evaluate current counseling-related websites in order to direct clients towards resources that are targeted to their own specific career needs, so they do not have to search endlessly through hundreds of random sites. Special training is needed to help counselors integrate Internet use with counseling interventions while being aware of ethical issues and professional standards related to distance counseling. Because of the continuously evolving nature of the counseling profession, counselors and counselor educators must become aware of, and adapt to, our clients' changing needs and modes of learning (Jencius, 2000). Sampson (1997) recognized three key counselor behaviors that contribute to effective client use of computer-assisted counseling. These behaviors include: 1) screening clients to ensure that they would, in fact, benefit from computer applications, 2) orienting clients to computer applications that would fit their needs, and 3) following up with clients to ensure that such applications have effectively met their needs and that they can use this new information for future problem solving and decision making.

Special training in multicultural issues is also critical, particularly because a distance career counseling model allows counselors access to a diverse pool of clientele (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). Counselors who recognize and are sensitive to cultural characteristics of different geographic regions and ethnicities will be more effective in understanding client needs and ultimately providing greater support and better tailored services.

Supervision of Distance Career Counselors

Supervision practices may also be provided via distance modalities in addition to face-to-face scenarios. Christie (n.d.) conducted a study to determine the nature of four Master's level counseling interns at Oregon State University, in a distance clinical supervision environment. Results indicated a motivation to participate in the distance supervision experience, improved clinical skill, and movement toward greater autonomy. Thus, supervision may not only include new content (distance counseling work), but also a new relationship process. It is essential that distance career counselors have a means of continually evaluating their skills in critical areas: successful handling of their caseload, quality completion of all written communication, delivery of client satisfaction, and several other counseling competencies, all of which can be monitored through supervision (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press).

Ethical Issues and Credentialing Related to Distance Career Counseling

Ethical Issues

When providing distance career counseling, it is essential for counselors to find resources and support systems to inform their ethical practices. The major counseling associations have issued guidelines and standards to recommend ethical practices for web/cyber/Internet/distance counseling. In addition to the NCDA reference previously mentioned, the following resources are both informative and helpful: *American Counseling Association Ethical Standards for Internet Online Counseling* (http://www.counseling.org/resources//internet.htm), and the National Board For Certified Counselors and Center For Credentialing and Education statement on ethics entitled *The Practice of Internet Counseling* (http://www.nbcc.org/ethics/webethics.htm). These guidelines cover the major areas of privacy, confidentiality, record-keeping, the counseling relationship, and informed consent, as well as the limitations and risks inherent in technology-assisted counseling work.

Additional resources are provided via ERIC/CASS on the Cybercounseling and Cyberlearning website (http://cybercounsel.uncg.edu). This resource includes contributions from the American Counseling Association Cyber Technology Committee. Finally, the Florida State University Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling and Career Development (http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter) provides significant information for individuals seeking information about the application of technology to counseling, research, and program development in the career development field.

Credentialing of Distance Career Counselors

Licensure and certification are also important issues since they both intersect and impact the practice of distance career counseling. There are differences between how licensure and certification both protect clients and afford counselors the right to practice. While both credentials intend to provide protection for consumers, the former governs the legality of counselors serving clients according to the regulations of each state that has a licensure law. Bloom and Sampson (2001), as well as Koocher and Morray (2000), present survey results from State Counselor Licensure Boards and Attorneys General regulations pertaining to "webcounseling" and other forms of electronic counseling. The practice of career counseling, however, is not regulated in every state which has a licensure law, and such regulations (including national, state, and local) of non-institutional private practice are clear only to a point with respect to distance counseling. Peterson (2002) provides an informative treatment of ethics and technology, while stating at the same time that a great deal of work needs to be accomplished in this area to protect clients, and to provide a level of support to counselors who are genuinely attempting to develop and deliver new service models. This issue is particularly important as counselors navigate technology's sea of ambiguity, where the tides of change are a daily challenge.

Without ethical regulations and standards, the practice of distance counseling would be open to charlatans and unqualified service providers, ultimately sabotaging the integrity of the counseling profession, discouraging forward thinking, and eliminating technology's potential for positive impact on clients (Hughes, 2000). The same holds true for any form of distance models. With more distance learning courses and opportunities being offered, standards have to be established to prevent "fraudulent diploma mills" from interfering with an alternate and potentially valuable delivery of higher education (Guernsey, 1999; as cited in Bobby & Capone, 2000, p. 375).

Distance career counseling programs that establish high industry standards for career counselors ensure that specific educational and experiential requirements have been met, thus lending to higher quality service. Such standards include a graduate degree in counseling, certification from nationally recognized credentialing organizations such as the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), appropriate career counseling experience, and specialized training in distance career counseling (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press).

Distance Career Counseling: Assessment, Web Sites, and Written Feedback

Online Assessment Tools

Distance career counselors have the opportunity as well as the obligation to provide their clients with effective assessment tools that are validated for online use. The creative integration of expressed, measured, and manifest career choice variables can afford very helpful information to clients as they seek to explore employment or educational options. Written assessment instruments along with carefully crafted in-take documents provide valuable client information which can be further expanded and validated by appropriate verbal assessment protocols. Assessment and evaluation results of overall counseling goals may be reported in a highly personalized manner using state-of-the-art, Internet-supported, counseling communication products.

Although web-based assessment tools are readily available to anyone via the Internet, both the validity and reliability of such tools must be considered. Because both valid and invalid assessments may appear similar to the average Internet user, it is unreasonable to assume that anyone will be able to identify a valid system (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). An effective distance career counseling program can carefully select well-validated career assessment tools via the Internet through such reliable organizations as Psychological Assessment Resources (PAR), publishers of the Self-Directed Search, and other trusted assessment tools (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). Assessment results alone, however, may be subject to misinterpretation and may neglect to address more core counseling issues for clients. For this reason, current research continues to reinforce the belief that effective

career counseling involves a clear understanding of assessment results so that they do not serve as merely answers, but as tools for trained counselors to guide clients through exploration and well-formulated action plans (Malone, Miller, & Hargraves, 2001).

Web Resources

Well-designed and user-friendly websites can also provide clients with an understanding of the career counseling process and their own career development planning needs. Beyond these two important contributions, the site may also assist clients in linking to personally meaningful and pre-screened resources related to their specific needs. This brokering of client need with related resources saves individuals from feeling overwhelmed or confused in the face of the thousands of web resources currently available. Counselors who are familiar with Internet resources and who are trained in evaluating new information technology can help clients weed out extraneous information (Malone, Miller, & Hargraves, 2001), or information that is fraudulent or outdated (Sampson, 1998). For example, Richard Bolles, a career development professional, provides pre-screening career-related web sites on his own "What Color is Your Parachute" web site at the "Parachute Picks" section (as cited in Sampson 1999a).

By instilling the competence to search, retrieve, evaluate, and apply information from both on- and off-line resources, counselors are encouraging clients to become masters of their own career development. Again, the counselor is not providing clients with the answer, but teaching them the process of finding the answers for themselves, a tool that is far more valuable and can be used again and again. With the ability to evaluate and apply information, clients can separate the "substantive from the superficial" and convert this newfound knowledge into "personal action strategies" (Walz, 2000, p. 410). Whereas this learning process might prove simple to some clients, others with moderate or low "readiness" for decision-making require greater supervised Internet use (Sampson, 1999b). Counselors are empowering clients by providing them with web-surfing assignments in between counseling sessions, and by encouraging them to "be weaned from the counselor and become a self-actualized career researcher" (Verhoweve, n.d.).

Written Communication Via Technology

Recent research in cybercounseling/distance counseling literature (Boer, 2001) as well as more qualitative "reports from the field" suggest that the process of "reading-writing-reflecting" is yielding powerful insights for both counselor and client. Somehow, the experience of committing thoughts to print and the reverse experience of drawing insights from the written word, appear to be deepening the effectiveness of the career counseling process for both counselor and client. Distance career counselors can foster such insights not only through e-mail contacts, but also through commentaries that summarize the counseling process. Such interventions provide subsequent steps and web links for continued career planning as well as exploratory research resources, and motivation for clients to continue working on their own career development process. The ReadyMinds Distance Career Counseling Program refers to such a document as "Insight Into U™," a four-page personalized synthesis of the client's career development process as experienced by the ReadyMinds Career Counselor and provided to the client upon completion of the program (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press).

Assessing Client Satisfaction and Program Effectiveness When Using Distance Methods

Effective and quality career counseling, whether from an individual or as part of an organizational program, requires clear and candid evaluation from clients. Written evaluative responses from clients using both quantitative as well as qualitative measures should speak to not only effective outcomes of the career counseling but also to the distance delivery system's impact on that counseling quality. Frequent and systematic review of constructive criticism will lead to improved service to clients. Analysis of initial research suggests that areas of satisfaction include: convenience, efficiency, strong working alliance with the counselor, helpful and personally useful resources, increased motivation to complete the work of the counseling, and a better understanding of the career counseling process. Constructive criticism topics include: wanting more time with the counselor, extending the counseling over a longer period of time, a desire for greater specificity in written reports, and difficulties in maintaining appointment times (Ready and Motivated Minds, L.L.C).

Anticipation and Resolution of "Difficult Situations" in the Distance Career Counseling World

The logistical realities of engaging in distance work with clients amplify some of the already difficult scenarios that may emerge in counseling relationships and settings. These challenges range from missed appointments to crisis or emergency situations, which are certainly less likely to appear in non-therapeutic career counseling cases.

However, the need for more clinical counseling may emerge within the context of career counseling, or the former may be occurring simultaneously with the latter. Distance career counselors must be sure to have back-up information available before beginning work with clients for referrals or emergency interventions as well as appropriate release of information protocols for sharing information with related institutions or sponsoring organizations. Appropriate permission forms are needed for work with minors. Written emergency plans for suicide or homicide situations must be part of all training programs and receive appropriate emphasis so they are clearly understood. On a less dramatic note, clients who wish to access additional career counseling from a more local source should be supplied with options upon request or as perceived by the distance counselor (Ready and Motivated Minds, L.L.C.).

Business and Organizational Relationships in the Distance Career Counseling World

Clearly this new form of career counseling is bringing greater interaction among professionals from counseling, business, and technology. The points of view, as well as the institutionally-related cultural differences of these disciplines and fields of practice, are an invitation to exciting growth and honest resolution of challenges for everyone involved. For example, although it is important for distance career counselors to already have an advanced level of technical skill, it is also essential for a distance career counseling program to have technologically skilled staff members available for troubleshooting (e.g., with a specific computer, an Internet service provider, or technical breakdowns). Integrating input from such diverse entities will provide higher quality services through critical feedback and recommendations for program development and counselor training from all angles (Malone, Miller, & Miller, in press). Implications for global and multicultural cooperation flourish, as technology allows greater access and opportunities for collaboration and "unification of people from around the world" (Walz, 2000, p. 412). As long as *what is best for our clients* remains the gyroscope, the outcomes for technology-assisted distance career counseling appear to be promising.

Conclusion

Technology as a counseling tool has taken many counseling professionals by surprise, since the counseling profession itself has traditionally relied on "low-technology" tools (Jencius, n.d.). However, we must continue to enhance our competencies, "at a time when the relevance and worth of a helping service is judged by the extent to which and how well it uses technology" (Walz, 2000, p. 412). We must no longer use traditional thinking to deal with nontraditional events and resources but move "out of the box" (Walz, 2000, p. 410) and commit ourselves to the understanding and learning of a counseling medium that has proven to be "much more than a passing fad" (p. 412).

Biography

Yas Djadali is a National Certified Counselor who works in the Career Center at the University of California at Irvine. She is also a trained distance career counselor and serves clients in the ReadyMinds Career Counseling Program (http://www.readyminds.com). James F. Malone is Director of Career Counseling and Training for ReadyMinds. In addition to holding National Counselor Certification, he is an Approved Clinical Supervisor and a Fellow in the National Career Development Association. The authors thank Ms. Toni Rumore, a Corporate Assistant at ReadyMinds, for her generous work in editing and overall preparation of the manuscript. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to James F. Malone, Director of Career Counseling and Training, ReadyMinds, 50 West 23 St., New York, N.Y. 10010 (e-mail: jim@readyminds.com)

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